THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 60: Program #10 December 9, 1988

Two British films, one an American premiere

WILD BOY (Gainsborough, 1934) Directed by Albert de Courville; produced by Michael Balcon; music by Paul Tynan; screenplay by Stafford Dickens from an original story by Albert de Courville and J.E.S. Bradford; Art Director, Alfred Junge; 86 minutes.
With: Sonnie Hale, Billy Grovenor; Gwyneth Lloyd (Maggie Warren); Lyn Harding (Redfern); Flanagan and Allen (Book-makers); Leonora Corbett (Gladys); Ronald Squire (Rollo); Fred Kitchen (plumber); Arthur Sinclair (Murphy); Cyril Smith (kennel boy) and Mick the Miller as Wild Boy.

The fact that this film is being given its US premiere tonight, some 54 years later, doesn't of course make it a major cultural event, nor can one claim that American audiences, deprived of it for so long, have formed an incomplete assessment of the history of British film! But it's always interesting (to me at least) to find a town in a 1934 release, which reflects a certain aspect of the time in which it was filmed. The film is a bloodless melodrama built around greyhound racing, a sport which was at the very peak of its popularity in Britain in the mid-30's, a popularity reflected in the number of novels, movies and even plays written about the subject. The sport was popular here too (though possibly more as an added outlet for the gambling urge) and Edward G. Robinson's "Dark Hazard", likewise a 1934 release, was one of the American movies devoted to the subject. "Wild Boy" is totally forgotten in Britain and will probably never be shown there again, unless Ted Turner moves it into British tv and starts offering fare like this at 3.0 in the morning! It was definitely an "A" film however, though its boxoffice chances were probably bolstered by having a strong American film play in support. Director de Courville was an interesting though lesser talent in Gainsborough's stable, with 1936's "Seven Sinners" almost certainly his best film; Sonnie Hale is probably his most famous role however, the star of three of her films, and a cockney comedian in such later films as "The Gaunt Stranger". At this time he was quite a popular leading man (he made this film immediately after Matthews' "Evergreen") with likeable song and dance talents, but his personality was better suited to the stage (he was also a playwright) and he was never as popular or as effective in film. It's interesting to see him here in a relatively straight role. Lyn Harding, a superb actor, was also one of Britain's best heavies, though his villainy is rather subdued here. And Flanagan & Allen's first appearance in a feature. The next year they made their first starring feature, and of course achieved their greatest success as part of the Crazy Gang team, which made its initial feature in 1937. Mick the Miller, the greyhound that gets above-the-title billing, alas has little personality and none of the acting ability of Rin Tin Tin, but presumably he won a lot of money for gamblers in depression-England, and his name may have been quite a boxoffice lure at that particular time.

THE MAGIC BOX (British Lion, 1951; US release in 1952) Directed by John Boulting; Produced by Ronald Neame; screenplay by Eric Ambler from a play and novel by Ray Allister; Camera, Jack Cardiff; Production Design, John Bryan; Music, William Alwyn; 110 mins. Technicolor.
With: Robert Donat, William Friese-Greene; Margaret Johnston, Edith Harrisson; Maria Schell (Helen Friese-Greene); John Howard Davies (Maurice); David Oake (Claude); Renee Asherson (Miss Tagg); Richard Attenborough (Anthony Kennison); Brian Oulton (Simon); Siemon Midalini (Lyon); Muir Mathieson (Sir Arthur Sullivan); Laurence Olivier (P.C. 94); and Michael Dennis, Leo Genn, Henry Edwards, Marius Goose, Joyce Grenfell, Robertson Hare, Kathleen Harrison, Janette Scott, William Hartnell, Stanley Holloway, Mervyn Johns, Miles Malleson, Dennis Price, A.E. Matthews, John McCallum, Bernard Miles, Cecil Parker, Eric Portman, Margaret Rutherford, Sheila Sim, Basil Sydney, Sybil Thorndike, David Tomlinson, Peter Ustinov, Frederick Valk, Emsyn Williams, Kay Walsh, George Wither.

Designed to help launch the Festival of Britain in 1951, itself designed to proclaim a new Elizabethan age with attendant progress and prosperity, "The Magic Box" is a handsome and star-laden showcase for such an event. But it is also a curious choice of subject matter, in that Friese-Greene was basically a wool-gatherer and a failure, and it was his lack of foresight and business acumen (faults shared by many British film pioneers) that kept Britain from being a force in world cinema for at least two decades. Claims made on Friese-Greene are at least vague and debatable, and the film makes no solid claims it can't back up, and cunningly avoids historic dates and events. Even the dramatic circumstances attendant on his death - it is claimed that the small amount of money he had in his possession was the exact price of a cinema seat - is somewhat contrived, since it was the price of a seat when this film was made, not when he died (in 1921)! But if it's of minor value as film history, it's a veritable treat in terms of art direction, decor, costume design (all lavish and meticulous) and of course in its epic scale, with Donat naturally standing out with a performance of subtlety and poignancy.

Program ends app. 10:50. (No discussion period) ---- William K. Everson